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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Banning Foreign Scientists

SUSAN STAMBERG: The Ethiopian government has banned all foreign scientists from working in the country. The ban affects researchers in archaeology, paleontology, and anthropology, and cuts them off from the richest human fossil deposits in the world.

NPR science reporter Laurie Garrett has the story.

LAURIE GARRETT: The closure of Ethiopia's borders to science is a reflection of concerns Third World nations increasingly share, concern for national security, concern for protection of national treasures, and concern for development of a generation of Third World scientists.

In Ethiopia, the Afar region is rich with ancient human fossils. It is also torn by political unrest in a nation dominated by a Soviet-backed government aided by Cuban troops. There are few Americans in the country, fewer still in remote regions of guerrilla activity, such as the Afar.

The only Americans granted relatively free movement in Ethiopia are scientists. Claudia Carr spent much of the late '60s and '70s doing research in Ethiopia, working on some of the most important anthropology expeditions.

CLAUDIA CARR: The permits and freedom of movement and roadblocks and ability to go to the field without government, quote-unquote, representatives, you know, has always been a problem for some years. In addition to that, there was an anthropologist, Glenn Ford, a British fellow, who was in the Afar region, actually, who was murdered by the Ethiopian police. That was while I was in the field in 1975-6

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GARRETT: American geologist John Cobb was expelled from the country in 1978. He has just announced his expulsion resulted from accusations that he was acting as a CIA operative. Cobb hotly denies the charge. But some of Cobb's colleagues feel that the incident could threaten their own work in the area.

Anthropologist Tim White of the University of California in Berkeley was part of a major expedition in the region last year.

TIM WHITE: And the thing that concerns me the most about this episode is the fact that it is possible that Americans were engaged in scientific research and at the same time were involved in intelligence for the United States overseas. And if that is true, that would be shocking to me and to my colleagues because of the association.

DONALD JOHANSEN: I'm of the same opinion.

GARRETT: Donald Johansen, Director of the Institute for Human Origins in Berkeley. Eight years ago, Johansen found the oldest known human skeleton, dubbed Lucy, in the Ethiopian deserts.

JOHANSEN: It throws, obviously, the possibility of a bad light being thrown on all of us, other people who are doing research.

GARRETT: Whether or not any actual CIA agents infiltrated research expeditions in the Afar, scientists will undoubtedly continue to be under suspicion. Claudia Carr says it is, unfortunately, quite easy to be labeled a CIA agent in the Third World.

CARR: An offhand remark, a remark which is meant simply as a professional remark might be taken politically, and so forth. These things are really hard to predict.

GARRETT: Did you ever find yourself getting in trouble in situations like this?

CARR: I really hardly know anyone who hasn't. And I'm certainly not an exception. Sure, I have been in trouble, in particular in Ethiopia, with accusations by one or another person, or questioning, and so forth, in terms of what I'm doing.

GARRETT: So, says Carr, scientists must be acutely aware of the local political situation in their research area. They must also be sensitive to the growing science nationalism in the Third World.

Carr was detained in the late '60s by the Ethiopian government, but it wasn't for security reasons. She was transporting a fossil for her expedition leader. Ethiopia claims over a million fossils and artifacts have been removed from their soil in the last 15 years by French, Italian, and American expeditions. Of that, says Ethiopia, some 10 percent have been returned.

At the urging of American scientists working in Ethiopia, the NSF funded construction of a national museum and laboratory at Addis Ababa. But now Ethiopia wants her people trained so that they can conduct the research themselves and Ethiopia can grab some of the glory for the dramatic findings in the Afar. Ethiopia is now formulating new guidelines that will govern foreign scientists. The guidelines are being watched closely by other Third World nations, notably Tanzania, Kenya, and Zambia.

The National Science Foundation's Steve Brush says the demands of Ethiopians are typical of trends throughout the Third World.

STEVE BRUSH: There is, I think, a very natural, and certainly common around the world, feeling on the part of Third World officials that they are really second-class citizens in international science. And there is some natural, I think, hostility that derives from this.

GARRETT: The science nationalism and security concerns in the Third World affect all fields of research, not just anthropology. For example, a tree frog researcher from San Francisco has had his search for a bizarre African species held up by local government concerns.

In the U.S., the NSF recognizes that more money will have to be siphoned into local training and research programs in the Third World if Americans are to be guaranteed access to research areas.

In terms of security, some professional scientific societies have ethics committees that specifically try to smoke out agents, in hopes that expeditions will be permitted to conduct research without local interference.